



## Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

### “MY CAT HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER” FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### WHAT IS CANCER?

Cancer is a term used to describe a disease that is caused by a tumour (*or neoplasia*) – a collection of abnormal cells within the body that continue to grow and divide without control. This usually results in the development of masses (*growths or lumps*), which are mainly composed of the dividing abnormal cells.

Some tumours do not spread to other parts of the body and tend not to invade other surrounding tissues – these are termed ‘*benign*’ tumours. In contrast to this, the term cancer is generally used to describe ‘*malignant*’ tumours which often do invade surrounding normal healthy tissue, and may spread to other sites in the body (or ‘*metastasis*’), via the bloodstream or lymphatic system.

Because of their more aggressive and invasive nature, malignant tumours (*cancers*) are generally more serious than benign tumours, often causing more serious and extensive disease, and are generally more difficult to treat.

The most common sites of cancer in the cat include the skin, the white blood cells (*leukaemia or lymphoma*), the mouth, the stomach and intestines, and the mammary glands.

#### WHAT CAUSES CANCER?

As is often the case in human medicine, the cause of cancer in an individual cat is often unknown and indeed many cancers are likely to arise for a number of different reasons.

Inherited (*genetic*) susceptibility to the development of certain tumours almost certainly occurs in cats, although relatively little is known about this at present. During a cat’s life, they may be potentially exposed to a number of different things that can trigger abnormalities within cells that may ultimately lead to development of cancer. This may include exposure to sunlight or to a wide variety of different chemicals (*carcinogens*). In most individuals however, the underlying causes and triggers for the cancer remain unknown.

We do know that some viral infections in cats can cause cancer, and FeLV (*Feline Leukaemia Virus*) is probably the best example of this.

#### WHAT ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS?

This very much depends on the type of cancer your cat has, and what part of the body is affected. In some instances, surgery may be a viable option to remove a tumour. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy may also be considered on a case-by-case basis. Once you and your vet have discussed the treatment options available for your cat’s cancer, it is important to carefully consider how your cat may cope with the different treatment options, before reaching a decision.

In some instances palliative care to keep your cat happy and comfortable and maintain an acceptable quality of life may be the most appropriate option.



#### HOW DO CATS COPE WITH CANCER?

The most important thing to remember is that your cat does not know they have cancer. They may feel a little under the weather and a bit lethargic, but unlike humans, they don’t have the big ‘C’ word looming over their heads.

Pets are also influenced by their owners’ moods, so one of the most important things you can do for your pet is to remain as positive and normal as possible.



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### IS THE CANCER CONTAGIOUS TO OTHER ANIMALS OR PEOPLE?

Not at all. Cancer is caused by cells in the body mutating and is therefore created within the body and cannot be passed on, even in blood or saliva.

### DOES MY CAT NEED TO HAVE CHEMOTHERAPY?

Not all cats with cancer need to have chemotherapy; indeed some cancers can be removed with just surgery. It is very much dependant on exactly what type of cancer your pet has and the treatment plan recommended by your vet – every patient is different, and treatment will be uniquely tailored to their best interests. Even if chemotherapy is an option, the benefits must outweigh the cons of putting a pet through such procedures – again this will very much depend on the individual case and the personality and temperament of the cat.

### HOW IS CHEMOTHERAPY ADMINISTERED?

Chemotherapy can be administered in multiple ways, and the type is dependent of what kind of cancer your pet has. There are three different ways of administering these drugs: orally in the form of a pill; by injection; or intravenously.

### DO PETS GET SICK AFTER CHEMOTHERAPY?

Sometimes, but not to the same extent that humans do. If this occurs, it is normally a few days following chemotherapy, and anti-sickness drugs can be prescribed to overcome this.

### HOW LONG HAS MY CAT GOT TO LIVE?

Each case must be evaluated individually, with the type of cancer and part of the body affected taken into consideration. In some cats, surgical removal of the cancer can be curative, and your cat may go on to live for many more years. Some cats with advanced stages of disease affecting multiple organs may sadly have only a few weeks.

### WILL MY CAT BE IN PAIN?

Again, this very much depends on the type of cancer your pet is suffering, but various options for pain management are available, and it is of utmost importance that we do not allow your pet to suffer pain. Cats are “*masters of disguise*” and signs of pain can be very subtle and easily missed. Some signs of pain in cats include:

- Decreased activity, lethargy, decreased interaction with people and other pets
- Decreased appetite
- Decreased grooming
- Toileting outside of litter tray
- Vocalisation
- Hiding
- Altered facial expression
- Altered posture
- Restlessness
- Increased body tension and / or flinching in response to touch
- Increased breathing pattern
- Dilated pupils
- Aggression

### WHEN WILL I KNOW THE END IS NEAR?

Quality of life is the number one most important thing to consider with chronically ill pets. We must be able to keep your pet free from pain, discomfort and distress, and once we reach a point where they are having more “*bad*” days than good, then it is time to consider euthanasia as the last kindness you can give them. Remember, pets are unable to rationalise what they are feeling, so it is of utmost importance that we do not prolong their suffering, and allow them to die with dignity. It is sadly extremely rare for cats to die peacefully in their sleep.